**The path of the October Revolution was never like Nevsky Prospect**

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The prominent Russian thinker and revolutionary Nikolai Chernyshevsky once said that the path of history is not like Nevsky Prospect [the direct and clean main streetof St. Petersburg] but it goes through dusty and dirty fields, through swamps and wilds and consequently it is not for those who are afraid of being covered with dust and dirt.

And that was precisely the historical path of the October Revolution and the Soviet regime it gave rise to; a path which was at the same time magnificent and exceptionally hard, conflicting and violent.

The outbreak of the revolution was certainly no random occurrence. It was a direct consequence of the accumulation of explosive social contradictions in Russian Empire*,* aggravated to the extreme by the country’s participation in the war, at a time when no political forces (including the left) supporting the capitalist road to development were in a position to resolve these contradictions.

Nevertheless, the socialist course which was inaugurated with the October Uprising was a move in a strange new direction which fatefully reasserted Engels’s prophetic words that

Men who have boasted of having *effected* a revolution have always found on the morrow […] that once *effected*, the revolution has borne no resemblance at all to what they had intended. [[1]](#footnote-1)

From the very beginning of the revolution, its leadership faced a multitude of enormous problems, interwoven with fierce clashes and a constantly uncertain prospect of resolution. This resulted in forced concessions and painful modifications of the revolutionary agenda, which caused constant friction and serious internal dispute.

It is true that the Bolsheviks initially acted cautiously. Setting the goal of socialism and hoping for a revolution in Europe (primarily in Germany) they applied a moderate policy in the economy. In rural areas they accepted the individual peasants’ households while in the cities, with the exception of very specific and limited domains of the economy which were nationalised, they accepted private ownership of enterprises, justimposing on them a system of workers’ control.

However, it will not be long before, under civil war circumstances, the economy starts undergoing extensive nationalisations and Lenin starts considering possible the direct state control of all exchanges between city and country and the subsequent diminution, if not elimination, of commodity-money relations.

The bankruptcy of the ideas of War Communism, in which the Bolsheviks momentarily believed, as much under the strain of extraordinary war conditions, as under the influence of their own ideas about socialism, will become dramatically obvious when not only the sailors of Kronstadt but also the peasants of the Tambov region will rise *en masse* against them.

Realistically proposing the New Economic Policy (which was clearly perceived by the Bolsheviks as a painful retreat), Lenin was honest enough to admit the failure of his party’s previous policy:

 In attempting to go over straight to communism we, in the spring of 1921, sustained a more serious defeat on the economic front than any defeat inflicted upon us by Kolchak, Denikin or Pilsudski.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Lenin, exercising unique judgement, was the first to detect the contradictory nature of the regime that arose from the revolution. Envisaging, just two months before the October Uprising (in his work *State and Revolution*), a workers’ state in which all citizens will be “armed workers”, “employees and workers of a single country-wide state ‘syndicate’”, occupying themselves with “accounting and control” and receiving “equal pay” [[3]](#footnote-3), he is forced in early 1922 to admit: “Communistshave become bureaucrats*.* If anything will destroy us*,* it is this.” [[4]](#footnote-4)

In any case, after the end of the civil war and the Bolsheviks’ definitive victory, it became apparent that building a socialist society would have to come through a long, exceptionally hard and uncertain road, interwoven with the necessity to extensively manoeuvre, adjust and redefine the revolutionary plan.

The USSR of the 1920s, despite the economic recovery following the NEP, was a poor country, with an abundance of illiterate people, a weak productive basis and defence capacity, a very acute unemployment problem, specifically among the young, and at the same time, surrounded by hostile and more powerful capitalist states.

Born out of a great revolution, the Soviet regime had by no means established its survival. In 1933, Trotsky unequivocally noted:

It is clear, in any case, that, with the further decline of the world proletarian movement and the further extension of the fascist domination, it is not possible to maintain the Soviet power for any length of time by means of the internal forces alone.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Given that hope in a “world revolution” was now utterly utopian, the fate of the USSR would be determined by its ability, through the mobilisation of all available resources and its citizens’ overwork (very hard work by millions of people), to rapidly create a powerful industrial base, vitally important for building its defence capacity and ensuring its independent economic development.

Certainly, this enormous effort, connected with the expedited industrialization and forced collectivisation, occurred in difficult conditions and came hand in hand with a great deterioration of living standards for the greater part of the 1930s.

Most dramatic of all was the endeavour to collectivise individual peasants’ households, namely to transform them into production cooperatives, under insufficient material circumstances. Nevertheless, without this the rapid industrialisation of the country would be inconceivable. Only the swift and extensive collectivisation of agriculture would allow the state to steadily receive the necessary quantities of exportable grain at a low price, in order to import valuable technical equipment from abroad, but also to feed the rapidly increasing urban population. Moreover, it would render a large number of labourers from rural areas available, offering the dynamically developing industry the required workforce.

Collectivisation, however, literally rocked the Soviet society. Its implementation was connected with widespread clashes and use of violence.

In general, the construction of the socialist society in the USSR was characterised by extensive use of state violence in conjunction with the creation of powerful repressive mechanisms. This was primarily due to the fact that the attempted social transformations incited conscious and determined resistance from the exploitative classes and their social allies (the petty and middle bourgeois strata in cities and villages*,* as well as a large part of the intellectuals).

It was also due to the fact that the USSR faced, throughout its history, the hostility of far more stronger capitalist powers, resulting in the significant militarisation of its economy.

However, the enlargement of the state in the USSR had also another cause, as well; one organically linked with the very establishment and function of socialist production relations.

The socialisation of the meansof production rendered their planned management on a whole society scale a necessity. Given the elimination of the capitalist relations and the general shrinkage of market interactions, a wide network of managerial structures and relations became necessary for the coherent function and development of the whole of economy.

The Soviet state and its organs constituted the foundation of this network (with all enterprises, supplying and distributing organizations participating in it) as a mechanism that administratively unified the totality of fragmentary productive forces and processes, ensuring their planned and collaborative function. Without the state in this role, the productive forces would inevitably function through relations of market competition.

The development of the USSR, even at the level of heavy industry, did not make self-management possible for manual workers as immediate operators of the mechanized and/or manual means of production (to a large extent as servants to machines) precisely because they remained manual workers-direct producers, subdued to the particular conditions of their labour activity.

These workers, as direct, physical factors of mechanized production, were in a position to know and control the conditions of operation of individual machines or small production units, while they were unable to have a comprehensive understanding and control over broader production processes.

During the whole of Soviet history it was clearly confirmed Lenin’s observation that “an unskilled labourer or a cook cannot immediately get on with the job of state administration”[[6]](#footnote-6), organically linked to his other idea that

Unquestioning subordination to a single will is absolutely necessary for the success of processes organised on the pattern of large-scale machine industry […] revolution demands –precisely in the interests of its development and consolidation, precisely in the interests of socialism– that the people unquestioningly obey the single will of the leaders of labour. [[7]](#footnote-7)

Present throughout the Soviet history, the opposition between administrative-intellectual and executive-manual labour was best expressed precisely in this critical role of the Soviet state in managing the economy.

The planned management of the economy could certainly not have operated without the participation of workers, in various ways, in discussing the aims of the productive activity of each enterprise, without at least ensuring their consent to achieving these aims.

Nevertheless, in conditions where labour for millions of workers was not an innerneed but an external burden, given that it was arduous, unhealthy, monotonous (the mere mechanisation of the means of production with the worker functioning as a servant to machines retains the damaging effect of labour on his/her body and mind), there was still the need to manage the workers themselves by an external mechanism, in order for them to conscientiously fulfil their work duties.

Regarding this issue, Trotsky had shrewdly noted:

A socialist state even in America, on the basis of the most advanced capitalism, could not immediately provide everyone with as much as he needs, and would therefore be compelled to spur everyone to produce as much as possible. The duty of stimulator in these circumstances naturally falls to the state, which in its turn cannot but resort, with various changes and mitigations, to the method of labor payment worked out by capitalism.[[8]](#footnote-8)

At the same time, in the USSR it had not become possible to overcome commodity-money relations. Despite their shrinkage in certain periods (mostly using repressive measures) they were always present, legally, in the relations between the state and the cooperative sector, as well as between producers and final consumers, but also illegally, in the shadow economy.

Dealing with commodity-money relations, the way and extent of their replacement by relations of planned management of theeconomy, constituted an enormous problem for the Soviet economic theory and policy. Its unsuccessful resolution, either due to their forced shrinkage, even in sectors where they were inescapable, or –and primarily– due to their extensive reinstatement, even in sectors where the social character of labour had significantly developed, proved fatal to the socialist endeavour.

In fact, the development of market relations within a voluminous shadow economy, which (also facilitated by the economic policy of Soviet governments from the 1960s onwards) began to invade various sectors of official economy, determined the formation of social forces which ultimately subverted the socialist regime.

As it follows from the aforementioned, the USSR, as the most developed and representative socialist regime of the 20th century was inevitably a contradictory society. Its contradictions were specific. They arose internally within labour, amongst workers themselves, and came forth when the exploitative classes, as well as the relation between capital and labour, were abolished. They were the contradictions of the ever present enslaving division of labour, which, in conjunction with the inadequacy of means of consumption for the optimum satisfaction of needs, created specific competition among workers for the acquisition of a better (less hard/tiring, more creative) position in the social division of labour with a simultaneous increase, legally or illegally, of material gains.

Given that these contradictions could not be eliminated at once, the Soviet regime had to repressively keep them in check, while implementing social transformations which led to their alleviation. This was the reason of the inherently contradictory role of the workers’ state itself, which, on the one hand, had to contribute in the constantly increasing participation of workers in the management of the socialist society, on the other hand, it had to control their internal oppositions and competition so that they would not become overtly counterrevolutionary.

At the same time, maintaining and strengthening a separate from direct producers mechanism of their administration had as a consequence the preservation of its alienation from the society, the reinforcement of its inherent bureaucratic traits.

Ultimately, the Soviet regime, despite the great technological, economic and cultural progress it achieved, did not manage to render itself irreversible. In order to achieve that, it was not enough to merely do away with capitalism, but it was also required to accomplish an exceptionally deep transformation of labour, an accomplishment which was not attainable in the material conditions of the 20th century.

However, the most important fact in the history of the Soviet regime is that it surmounted all the overwhelmingly adverse initial conditions and odds, that, empowered by enthusiasm and the efforts of the working people, it initiated an astounding course of technological, economic, cultural and social progress internally while powerfully influencing the social relations in the rest of the world.

The October Revolution was an event that defined the 20th century history precisely because its creation, the USSR, became a global power, capable of influencing international politics.

What is especially fascinating is that, as regards the development of the USSR, it was not facilitated by the “world revolution” as was initially expected by the Bolsheviks, but instead, through the extensive efforts of its internal forces during the crucial decade of the 1930s, it became able to crash the fascist hordes on its own and went on to resolutely support the international course of the revolution in the aftermath of World War II.

The revolutionary (socialist, anti-imperialist) regimes which emerged after the war through a historically unprecedented wave of peoples’ liberation struggles were in every respect (technological, economic, social, cultural) inferior to the USSR and managed to survive and develop by receiving valuable aid in various forms from the first socialist state.

The course that the Soviet regime ran was never easy and straight. And it could certainly not be purged of “reversals” and “distortions”. In the 20th century conditions (in any conditions, for that matter) no pure socialist model would have been able to become established.

In conclusion, let us note that with its glorious and dramatic path, the Soviet regime revealed a new reality: namely what happens when the exploitative classes are abolished and the socialist-state ownership of the means of production is established, while a large number of workers remains submitted to an enslaving division of labour. The October Revolution and its creation, the USSR, posed vital questions concerning the issue of social emancipation.

The answer to these questions based in the examination of the contemporary characteristics and trends of the material production system is of fundamental importance for the class struggles of modern proletarians.

1. F. Engels, “To Vera Zasulich. 23 April 1885”, in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 47, Lawrence & Wishart*,* London 1995, p. 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. #  V.I. Lenin, “The New Economic Policy and the Tasks of the Political Education Departments” in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 33, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1973, p. 63.

 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. V.I. Lenin, “The State and Revolution” in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 25, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1974, p. 478. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. V.I. Lenin, “315. TO G. Y. SOKOLNIKOV”in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 35, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1973, p. 549. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. L. Trotsky, “The Class Nature of the Soviet State” in *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1933-34*, Pathfinder Press, New York, 1975, p. 118-119 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. V.I. Lenin, “Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?”in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 26, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1972, p. 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. V.I. Lenin, “The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government”in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 27, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1974, p. 269. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. L. Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, Pathfinder Press, New York, 1983, p.53. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)